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“Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions”

Lisa L. Moore, Joanna Brooks and Caroline Wigginton (Eds.)
Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2012

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As feminist scholars of the eighteenth century English and American literature, the authors of this anthology want to know how transatlantic movements of peoples impacted women’s lives, ideas, imaginations, hopes, and fears (p. 7). Furthermore, they want to know how transatlantic movements and encounters with women from other countries and continents affected the way women thought about themselves in a time of political revolution (p. 7).

Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions includes speeches, letters, essays, petitions, poetry, court transcripts, religious tracts, excerpts from novels and polemic pamphlets. As L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton observe, the word “feminism” originated in England in the late nineteenth century, but the texts collected in this book prove that the feminist ideas existed in Europe as early as the fifteenth century, and around the Atlantic world from the sixteenth century. Women’s English language writings from the seventeenth and eighteenth century influenced massively the Anglophone feminism which consolidated around three major issues: the nature and source of sexual difference, the institutionalized injustice of heterosexual marriage, and women’s access to education (p. 8). L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton define the “Age of Revolutions” as the culmination of centuries of radical change around the Atlantic world

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in a concentrated period of organized revolution to advance human freedom (p. 9). This period of radical transformation didn't bring any advancement for the rights of women because they were excluded from any form of political deliberation. Thus, the authors of this anthology can ask themselves if women had an age of Revolutions. The answer is yes if we take in consideration the example of American women such as Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren who can be considered revolutionary because they expressed their views about the status of women in society, demanding, as Abigail Adams in 1776, the end of the tyranny of men over women. Women participated in debates about revolution and liberation, and the texts collected in this anthology are a living proof of this commitment: fifty-nine feminist voices (many of women, but also of men) are brought together in this volume, some well-known, some anonymous, but all very similar. They constitute the main corpus of this book (pp. 35-371). These voices echo in chronological order, starting with Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643) and continuing with Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) etc.

Presenting the historical background of the age of Revolutions, L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton stress the fact that the American and French revolutions were incomplete for women. Even though the French revolution concluded with a declaration of rights for citizens, women were not included in this declaration, which sparked the dissatisfaction of feminists such as Olympe de Gouges who published in 1791 the "Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizen", and Mary Wollstonecraft who addressed "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" to Talleyrand, the minister of education. As L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton note, although the era's democratic revolutions failed to enfranchise women legally, women nonetheless drew from this time of profound economic, religious, political, and social change important resources for their own ongoing feminist struggles (p. 16). The modern concept of "citizen" introduced by the Age of Revolutions was applied only to men. In this respect, women had to begin their fight to obtain gender equality, one of the major obstacles being their lack of access to education. Moreover, the life expectancy for Englishwomen at that time was 36 years and the life expectancy at birth of white women in America was about 40 years. The main role of women was to bear children: in eighteenth-century England and America, more than 30% of first births occurred less than nine months after marriage, and the average woman gave birth to seven children during her lifetime. As for the women's basic literacy, the opportunities for higher education grew during the eighteenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, the rate of signature literacy in England was 35% for women and 60% for men, while in America the rate was 65% for women and 80% for men.

L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton talk about the postrevolutionary world divided in two spheres: a public sphere dedicated to men and a private sphere dedicated to women. Women contributed to the Age of Revolutions as writers, readers and organizers, leaving for posterity an archive of feeling, knowledge and experience that we can discover in this anthology. The goal of this volume is to recapture the excitement of revolutionary times and to give readers an energizing sense of the historical conditions, global movements, collective efforts, and individual actions that make feminist revolution (p. 30). L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton hope that by incorporating writings from a diverse range of traditions, they will open a new sense of the historical origins of feminism. It is considered that the feminism has its origins in Europe, but as the writings in this anthology show us, indigenous women came to feminism not to extend European liberal political philosophy of women's rights, but to defend traditional notions of women's authority against European invasion.

What can we learn from these women ?, ask L. Moore, J. Brooks and C. Wigginton. We can learn the revolutionary power of writing and reading and the value of affiliating and organizing with other women, and we can also learn that small or local artistic and political efforts can revolutionize our daily lives (p. 33).